

THE CLEVELAND
MUSEUM OF ART
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**EXHIBITION AT THE CLEVELAND MUSEUM OF ART EXAMINES THE
RESTORATION OF A MADONNA BY ITALIAN MASTER PINTORICCHIO**
November 19, 1991 - January 26, 1992

A project undertaken by the Museum's assistant curator of prints and drawings, Michael J. Miller, and assistant conservator of paintings Kenneth Bé, culminates in **The Recovery of a Renaissance Painting: A Madonna by Pintoricchio**. Bequeathed to the Museum in 1944 by Mrs. Francis F. Prentiss, this *Madonna and Child* by the Renaissance master Bernardino di Betto di Biagio, called Il Pintoricchio (1454-1513), was considered an unfinished painting made at the end of the artist's life, largely because of the brown color used in the Virgin's robe. Once thought to be original preparatory underpainting, painted as a base for the traditional blue which would have been painted over it, the brown proved to be the work of later restoring—probably done in the 19th century.

The painting was then heavily restored again around 1944, just before its arrival at the Museum, but not until it was cleaned in 1962 did the true extent of the damage become apparent: the entire cloak of the Virgin had been freely painted over large areas where the original blue paint had been scraped away (the expensive azurite pigment could be recycled). Conservators found that, below this brown overpainting, the artist's original underdrawings for the robe remained—but did not agree fully with the final design. The later removal of layers of blue paint had destroyed the only record of the original painted composition of the robe area. The restoration process was halted, and the panel remained in storage for nearly three decades, until late 1988, when conservator Bé and Renaissance scholar Miller began the joint project that has led to this exhibition.

Two accepted conservation approaches to solving such damage problems—leaving the cleaned work as is, with visible disfigurements, or attempting a partial reconstruction—both proved inappropriate. The abrasion to the surface was very uneven, leaving bare patches alongside thick residues of four or five layers of paint, so the unrestored panel was deemed unexhibitable. On the other hand, a reconstruction, to be valid, would have to start from a compositional basis, but the only solid clues to such a basis were the underlying preliminary drawings on the ground layer, and

these did not quite correspond logically to the orientation of the limbs and clothing in the undamaged portions of the picture. The conservation department, in consultation with the director and the appropriate curators, settled on a compromise, painting over the cloak area in extremely dark blues to approximate what the original azurite would have looked like after 400 years and many varnishings; the resulting tone was so dark that no detail implying folds of cloth needed to be added to achieve visual integrity. A thorough recounting of the restoration process, written by Kenneth Bé, appears in the December issue of *The Bulletin of The Cleveland Museum of Art*.

Michael Miller's detailed art historical analysis also appears in the December *Bulletin*. Because Italian art as a whole went through a major revolution around the year 1500, adjustments of just a few years as to the estimated dates of works made at that time can be very significant. Since it was established in 1962 that the Cleveland painting had indeed once been finished, at that time the estimated date was revised back to the mid-1490's. Mr. Miller's primary argument is that the Madonna dates neither to the 1490's nor, as the esteemed historian Bernard Berenson proposed some 80 years ago, to the end of Pintoricchio's career in 1513, but to about 1503/4, shortly after the painter moved to Siena. The intriguing evidence Mr. Miller cites as the basis for his theory is that this Madonna represents an aberration from the stylistic patterns in Pintoricchio's other works in the genre, and, in fact, shows the unmistakable influence on Pintoricchio of the master's pupil in Siena, the young Raffaello Sanzio (1483-1520), better known as Raphael—an unusual twist on the traditional scenario of the students imitating the style of their teacher, and a testament to the enormous influence of Raphael's emerging talent.

In support of this theory, he includes other works in the exhibition to demonstrate the stylistic interchange between Pintoricchio and Raphael when they worked together (between 1502 and late 1504). Specifically, Pintoricchio's forms in this Madonna are rounded and plastic, à la Raphael; by 1506, Pintoricchio had gone back to his established more angular style. Raphael's first efforts in the genre, which date to this same period, show facial structures borrowed directly from Pintoricchio: high forehead, broad cheeks, long nose, semi-closed eyes, and small mouth and chin—traits uncharacteristic of Raphael's later development. The Cleveland Madonna and this exhibition of half-a-dozen objects therefore document an important point of convergence between two of Italy's greatest Renaissance artists, and record a time, almost 500 years ago, when a successful and conservative middle-aged painter briefly shared inspiration with a rising young genius.

Admission to The Cleveland Museum of Art and to this exhibition is free.